

Looking Up

Outside Bozeman, Winter 2023-2024

First hunts are for dogs more introduction than trial. It is the culmination of many lessons, corrected failures, and increasing hope that he has been melded into a serviceable retrieving companion. Training sessions began shortly after weaning and settling into his new home. A soft bumper was loftily tossed in front of him with following encouragement to focus. Success was built upon with more challenging directions. At times, weariness to rudimentary tasks or plain obstinance halted the progress. Instruction would pause, the dog freed to his own whims, and resumed later on. It might be slow, but once learnt, a task did not need to be retaught. Before the first dawn in a blind, he had already retrieved hundreds of times and mastered a toddler-like vocabulary of commands. And this is how it went with my Chesapeake Bay Retriever Cane.

Yet, there are some things a dog cannot be taught. Reliance on the breed's dominant traits and natural instinct to elevate his performance is required. All consideration in the selection of the breed, the breeder, and the individual pup is based on the historical achievement of others dogs with the hope this progeny will resemble its parents. Cane's first hunt would reveal that despite my eager but middling training, he would excel as a ducking dog.

This duck hunt began as they all do in the blackness of night. Cane carried only the excitement of a routine ride in the truck and not that of seasoned expectation he would find after his first year. I parked and collected my decoys and shotgun before releasing him into the pre-dawn morning. An early October morning is the most pleasant weather a duck hunter will see which makes it ideal to enter a dog on its first trip. This place was new to Cane and the smells unknown. He investigated with a cautiousness that lacked timidity. A sharp two note whistle brought him from unseen to my left hip. Sharp and quick, he responded with an awareness this was not an ordinary morning.

Trucking my gear into the blind and setting the spread, I allowed Cane a freedom to inspect and acquaint himself with his new office. It would just be us this morning and I allowed him to sit up on the bench instead of *place*, usually an old bath mat on the ground in the corner. Always on guard, Cane used this slight vantage to peer over the edge into the waiting darkness. I arrived early to my set to give it time to cool down and we still had an hour until the sun rose.

A jingling from Cane's collar let me know that he had abruptly moved his head in the darkness. A moment passed and it happened again. I clicked on my headlamp and his green eyes were pointing up. Then I heard it: wings. Cursing myself, I turned off my lamp. "Good boy." Ducks move before first light and the whistling from their wings announces their incoming. Cane had never heard them before. And until the sun emerged, the source of these mystery sounds would remain cloaked. More jingles followed when whooshing wings beat nearby. A few faint splashes let me know that birds had landed in the spread before us. I marveled at Cane's attention and ability to hear each bird flying over us.

When the light was finally legal it revealed an empty spread and the birds had vanished. Still, there was a flurry of movement above us as mallards, pintails, and wigeon in small flocks dashed against a gray clouded sky. Each one could be seen and Cane began to connect these sights with the sounds. He anticipated their arrival based on the noise of their flight and searched with his nose pointing soundward. And when they appeared a crisp movement of his head would turn into a smooth following until the ducks were out of sight. All morning they

flew high, never offering a shot, but Cane knew what they were. He whined slightly when seven larger Canada geese lumbered over us.

I trust Cane's ears now better than my own. I take cues from him that birds are coming as he does from me to find them when down. He hunts with me, beside me in the blind, with his eyes. Successful hunts have connected the flying birds with shooting and his role of retrieving. In his first morning hunt, Cane acquired a discerning ear and that is something that cannot be taught, only earned in the field.